Washington Area Bicyclist Association

GETTING THERE BY BIKE

Testimony Before the D.C. Board of Zoning Adjustments
February 12, 2002

Re: BZA Application No. 16833

My name is Ellen Jones. I am the Executive Director of the Washington Area Bicyclist Association (WABA), a nonprofit organization incorporated in the District of Columbia in 1972. WABA's mission is to create a healthier, more liveable region through bicycle advocacy. WABA has 5,400 members in the metropolitan Washington region, 1,700 of whom live in the District of Columbia.

On behalf of WABA and the Coalition for the Metropolitan Branch Trail, I am here today to speak against the approval of the BZA Application No. 16833. The applicant maintains that he cannot accommodate the Metropolitan Branch Trail with this development plans. This development, as planned, would eliminate the potential for a grade-separated crossing for the trail in the area of Carroll Avenue, a busy motorized thoroughfare running from the Takoma Park Metro Station to downtown Takoma Park.

The Metropolitan Branch Trail directly supports five of the revitalization goals identified by the Takoma Park community:

1. Preserve and enhance the Takoma small town/village character;
2. Encourage a neighborhood scale for new development;
3. Make major pedestrian corridors pedestrian-friendly;
4. Leverage public and private sector opportunities; and
5. Improve cross-jurisdictional planning.

The Metropolitan Branch Trail is smart growth for Takoma Park. Smart growth isn't the easiest or fastest way to develop economically. Smart growth offers the long-term benefit of sustained economic activity within a fabric of liveable communities. Such communities favor transit, walking and bicycling in their design. The result is affordable transportation, cleaner air and an infrastructure that encourages active lifestyles to combat the growing national public health epidemic of obesity.

BZA
Case No. 16833
Exhibit No. 32

Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
CASE NO.16833
EXHIBIT NO.32

733 15th St NW Suite 1030 • Washington, DC 20005-2212 • phone 202-628-2500 • fax 202-628-4141 • e-mail: waba@waba.org • website: www.waba.org

We maintain that granting this variance would be a substantial detriment to the public good in this area and undermines a $16 million public investment in the Metropolitan Branch Trail by the District and Federal governments.

Metropolitan Branch Trail Description

The Metropolitan Branch Trail (MBT) is a proposed multi-use bicycle and pedestrian trail connecting Silver Spring, Maryland with Union Station and the National Mall. It follows the route of the Red Line Metro rail and is being developed as both a non-motorized transportation facility and recreational greenway. It will provide a key missing link in the city/regional trail system in Northeast DC. The MBT will connect the Capital Crescent Trail in Silver Spring, MD and the Anacostia Tributaries Trail System in Prince George's County with the National Mall. It is also the route of the American Discovery Trail and East Coast Greenway, two of the longest national trail development efforts to emerge in the 1990's.

The DC Division of Transportation has dedicated over $16 million in funding for trail planning, design and construction. Montgomery County has recently approved a trail feasibility plan for the segment from DC to the Silver Spring CBD, and is seeking funding from local and state sources. The public's investment in this project is substantial.

The impact of the loss of a grade-separated crossing for the project is best understood in the context of the other alignments that have been suggested for the trail in Takoma Park.

Metropoltian Branch Trail Alignments in Takoma Park

The recent D.C. Office of Planning's Small Area Planning process identified four possible alignments of the trail route through Takoma, DC. Each assumes that the connection to the Montgomery County, Maryland segment of the trail will be between the railroad tracks and Eastern Avenue at the DC/MD boundary (where Eastern Avenue becomes Takoma Avenue). Each alignment option described below begins at the DC/MD border at this point and moves from north to south:

Option A1 is shown on the attached map in red. It offers a trail alignment that is 90% off-street. The alignment goes across National Park Service property, angling away from Eastern Avenue, to a bridge over Piney Branch Road adjacent to the east side of the railroad tracks. It runs south along the railroad tracks behind the Cady Lee Mansion, continuing on a structure above the Eastmont Coop's parking lot, across the Metro Station property. A grade separated crossing would be provided over Carroll Street along the western edge of the applicant's property, to Vine Street. The trail would continue to Maple, to Sandy Spring Road, to Van Buren to 3rd Street. Trail segments on Vine, Maple, Sandy Spring and parts of Van Buren can be off-street in a sidepath setting.

Option A2, shown on the map in dark green, is primarily off-street as well. This alignment goes along Eastern Avenue in front of the Cady Lee Mansion and Eastmont Coop, to the WMATA development site and across the site to the railroad tracks. It also would have a grade separated crossing over Carroll Street along the western edge of the applicant's property to Vine Street. The trail would continue to Maple, to Sandy Spring Road, to Van Buren to 3rd St. Trail segments on Vine, Maple, Sandy Spring and parts of Van Buren can be off-street in a sidepath setting.

Option B, shown in light green on the map, is primarily on-street. This alignment goes along Eastern Avenue to Cedar Street then on to Carroll Avenue, Maple Avenue, Sandy Spring Road, under the railroad tracks at Aspen, turning south at 3rd Street. Trail segments on Eastern, Cedar, and Carroll would be in an on-street setting; segments on Maple, and Sandy Spring can be off-street in a sidepath setting.

Option C, shown in brown on the map, is also primarily on-street. This alignment goes along the Eastern Avenue sidewalk and along Piney Branch Road sidewalk under the railroad tracks and up a ramp system to a bridge over Piney Branch Road. The alignment proceeds on Chestnut to Spring using an easement adjacent to the railroad tracks to Cedar, at which point the trail would cross a 5-legged intersection at Blair, Cedar and 4th Streets. It would proceed south on 4th Street to Whittier, to 3rd. Trail Segments along Chestnut, Spring, 4th and Whittier would be in an on-street setting.

All of the alignment options diverge through Takoma, DC and converge again at 3rd Street and Van Buren, NE, on the west side of the railroad tracks. It is important to note that two trail alignment options have been proposed from the south edge of the Small Area Plan study area: 1) south on 3rd Street to North Dakota to Kansas & Blair Road (an interim on-street alignment), and 2) south on the Blair Road right of way from Van Buren to Kansas and Blair Road (a permanent off-street, sidepath alignment.).

DC Division of Transportation is in the process of determining the most appropriate alignment for the Trail through Takoma as well as its transition to points north and south of the study area.

While Option C would route the trail through the heart of the west-of-tracks commercial district in Takoma, the route does not offer much opportunity to provide an off-street trail experience and would send trail users through a series of traffic conflicts, that if possible to avoid, should be avoided. Adoption of this alignment would also insure that a major portion of the trail in DC (about 1 mile) would always remain an on-street segment with many at-grade intersections to

cross and a likelihood that it might never be upgraded beyond the posting of bike route signs.

Option B routes the trail on some of the most heavily congested and narrow streets in the area, is indirect, and in moving the trail to the Maryland edge of the neighborhood reduces its accessibility to Takoma, DC residents. It offers no benefits other than probably being the least expensive to build.

We recommend the adoption of Option A1 or A2 though the Takoma, DC area for two important reasons.

First, a trail is constrained, like a power grid, by its weakest link. A single gap damages the effectiveness of the entire network. In the case of the Metropolitan Branch trail, the trail network it supports is substantial, including the District of Columbia's trail network, the metropolitan Washington region's network, and a national network of trails, as I noted in the beginning of this testimony.

Secondly, the Metropolitan Branch Trail is conceived of as a transportation trail. It has to maximize travel advantages over motorized modes in order to be successful. Those trail advantages include:

1. Protection from faster, heavier motorized vehicles on the trail and at at-grade crossings;
2. Directness;
3. Elimination of stopping points; and
4. Moderate changes in grade.

If the Metropolitan branch trail doesn't offer these advances, then bicycling and walking loses their advantage in the choices people make about traveling. The lack of these advantages has contributed to the congestion and air quality problems that plague our communities today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, WABA requests that the applicant's request for a variance of the residential recreation space requirement not be granted because the development would foreclose the best alignment for the Metropolitan Branch Trail, thereby reducing the safety and effectiveness of the trail if this alignment is nonetheless selected, or even undermining the realization of the goal of building this trail altogether. By contrast, accommodating the trail within the development would be an ideal substitute for the recreation space required by zoning. Indeed, we might even suggest that a full variance -- not simply the 20 % variance requested by the developer -- would be warranted under these circumstances, thereby allowing the developer more economically usable space and offsetting any economic harm to the developer.

Without such an accommodation, granting the variance would be directly contrary to the Transportation Element of the D.C. Comprehensive Plan, Section 509.1, which states as a goal to "Support completion of a feasibility study and other measures necessary to construct the Metropolitan Branch Trail . . . " The variance relief will therefore create a substantial detriment to the public good and also undermine the Comprehensive Plan. It does not appear to us under these circumstances that the Developer has satisfied its very heavy burden of proving that the sort of exceptional circumstances exist that would justify a variance.